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## WELCOME! Elizabeth Price and the Life of Objects

In 2012, the British artist, Elizabeth Price, was nominated for and won the Turner Prize, for her show, *HERE*, at the BAL TIC Centre for Contemporary Art, in Gateshead, earlier that year. Three works were shown in the Centre's Level 3 gallery: *USER GROUP DISCO* from 2009 and *THE CHOIR* (2012) (which later became *THE WOOLWORTHS CHOIR OF 1979*), in two adjoining rooms, and *WEST HINDER* (2012), in a smaller room to one side.<sup>1</sup> The artist worked carefully with the gallery concerning the display. Screens no smaller than 3.5 metres across were installed, and specific projectors were chosen, that could deliver high-density blacks.<sup>2</sup> A variety of audio speakers were employed to produce exactly the right quality of sound for each work (a 'club environment-oriented' effect for *USER GROUP DISCO*, for example, and something more 'bass-heavy and immersive' for *WEST HINDER*).<sup>3</sup> Two rooms were carpeted – those showing *USER GROUP DISCO* and *WEST HINDER* – but *THE CHOIR* was shown in a wood-floored room, which helped the sound to bounce and echo (fig. 1). The complex sound-scape of this piece, which a technical note records was to be played at 'immersive (loud) volume', compelling but not overwhelming our attention, includes fragments of the Shangri-La's 1965 hit, *Out in the Streets*, occasionally bleeding into white noise, guitar reverb and speaker feedback. The rooms were dark, with walls painted in black or dark-grey for *USER GROUP DISCO* and *WEST HINDER* in particular, causing the images on screen to appear to glow intensely. Custom-built seating was provided, inviting the viewer to spend time with the work. In all these ways, a sensory address to the viewer was established that brought forms of address and response associated more often with music videos or club environments into the space of the gallery, but that also opened these out for scrutiny, unfolding them in ways that enabled them to be given the time and critical attention we more often associate with looking at works of visual art.

This installation strategy, combining an affective with a critical address, is of a piece with Price's description of herself as a post-Conceptual artist, in that she says 'I don't want to transcend material. I'm interested in, and part of, a world made up of unredeemed, sensual debris.'<sup>4</sup> She's also positioned herself as continuing a tradition of institutional critique, whilst making clear how she seeks

to renew its strategies: 'Institutional critique aspires to make the institution transparent', she says, 'in the hope that the mystique of its power will shatter – which of course it never does. My work ... accretes more weird, byzantine, shiny, viscous stuff to the edifice of the institution, not cleaning it up, but doing the opposite.'<sup>5</sup> In one of Price's earliest works, *WELCOME (THE ATRIUM)*, from 2008, she shows us an accumulation of such 'stuff': including, centrally, a gleaming assemblage of cogs and tubes that incorporates both a pot-plant and a chocolate fondue-dispenser (fig. 2-4). We see the words: 'If this was a building / This / Here / Then This / This would be the Atrium / where there is a Fountain. WELCOME!' Shot in a palette of velvety blacks and lush, creamy whites, the video establishes a luxurious visual address. Price appeals to structures of not-quite-reasoning visual pleasure, in her focus on the shininess of metal or liquid or the viscosity of melted chocolate. At the same time, carefully-timed sound-effects punctuate the musical sound-track to humourous effect; making clear the inherent ridiculousness of the objects she shows us, and our pleasure in them.

Indeed, the ridiculing of the seductive promises made by consumer culture is distinctive of Price's work. Each of her videos, since her break-through piece, *THE HOUSE OF MR X* in 2007, focuses on a collection of objects, which she presents in such a way as to draw out the promises of pleasure and ease that they extend to the subject who views them, even while these are also subtly mocked. The objects represent a mixture of up-to-date and outmoded consumer items, ranging from small figurines and other *objets d'art* (*AT THE HOUSE OF MR X*), through kitschy, once state-of-the-art kitchen gadgets and supposed labor-saving devices, such as salad spinners and wine coolers (*USER GROUP DISCO*), to luxury cars (*WEST HINDER*) and expensive hosiery packaging (*SUNLIGHT*, 2013).

The objects are introduced to the viewer in carefully-edited, often quick-cut montages of close-ups and wide-angle views, synchronised precisely to sound. The visual address is supplemented by words, which in most cases are not spoken aloud (*WEST HINDER* is an exception), but appear as motion graphics, written across the screen. Price uses a variety of PowerPoint and other devices for this purpose, drawn from the world of corporate presentations and marketing, such as swinging screen and turning page effects. Her words provide information and establish authority, but their source is anonymous, with a

slightly uncanny result; as the powerful seeming 'voice' is thus disembodied. Comprising a bricolage of quotations from a wide variety of sources – variously, short stories, car manuals, advertising, or philosophical essays – the resulting text is crafted to produce a tone that mimics the vacuity and emphasis of advertising copy. Affirmation is a repeated feature – the word 'YES!' appears in all these works at key points. This is used to establish a pause before the work continues; frequently it also marks an escalation of the text's emotional register. There is in addition a characteristic use of 'we', apparently voicing the inanimate objects pictured. Price has said she imagines the narration in every work as delivered by a chorus; a voice she describes as 'simultaneously didactic and unreliable'.<sup>6</sup> Correspondingly, there is a supplicatory, ingratiating address to the viewer as 'you'. The viewer is implicitly positioned as the consumer, for whose comfort and understanding the presentation has been arranged. 'Welcome' and 'Let us show you' are repeated refrains.

In thus parodying the use of language in advertising, Price develops a strategy begun in the work of artists including Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer in the 1980s. Indeed, Price has acknowledged Kruger, as a 'big influence' on her work (fig. 5), in offering 'a compelling ventriloquism of that silent, aggressive voice of print that fills our public space'.<sup>7</sup> In a pop-cultural register, the technique of 'voicing' the implicit promises of consumer objects and advertising is one that, Price has indicated, she adapts from John Carpenter's cult movie *They Live!* (1988), in which the central character finds a pair of sunglasses that, when worn, reveal the underlying messages of the mass media advertising and packaging surrounding him: 'MARRY AND REPRODUCE'; 'OBEY AND CONFORM'; 'STAY ASLEEP'; 'CONSUME'.<sup>8</sup> Where Carpenter's film is a literal illustration of ideology critique, however, translating the allure of the commodity in the barest terms, as submission to an authoritarian structure, Price eschews that direct address in her own use of text, ventriloquizing the commodity's appeal in a more humorous tone. What exactly is at stake in her exploration of consumption, and the artistic strategies she develops, are some of the questions this article sets out to address.

Recent theory has seen a 'turn to the object' in theories of 'object-oriented ontology', 'radical ecology', 'speculative realism', 'vibrant materialism', and other, related approaches.<sup>9</sup> These labels incorporate a spectrum of different thinkers

and goals, but broadly share a desire to abolish the traditional subject-object distinction, often deploying a kind of 'strategic anthropomorphism', which aims to dethrone human subjects from their supposed superior position, in an attempt to find ways out of the so-called Anthropocene era and develop new forms of radical politics.<sup>10</sup> In much of this work, little attention is paid to the particular economic structures of late capitalism, or to the traditions of historical materialism, including the theorisation of commodity fetishism, for example.<sup>11</sup> Instead, writers including Sherry Turkle and Jane Bennett have sought to found new paradigms of affective and mnemonic insight, responding sympathetically to our personal object-attachments and behaviours. If we learn to recognize the 'life' of objects, this work asks, what might be gained? Might we be enabled to overthrow or escape some of our most limiting preconceptions? Countering such progressive hopes, critiques from both the Left and more conservative political directions have been mounted of some of these philosophies as representing a new irrationalism taking root within the academy: recapitulating the mystifications of 'primitivism' or 'commodity fetishism in academic form'.<sup>12</sup>

Price's work offers a longer historical perspective on these debates, reminding us of an older and darker tradition in twentieth century art and theory: one that is characterized by a sense both of the more destructive and irrational drives underlying our relations with objects; as well as the ways in which the 'life' of objects is shaped and (de)formed by the labour relations underlying their production. As we have seen, Price retrieves a legacy of artistic scrutiny of objects explicitly under the Marxian signs of 'consumption' and 'commodity fetishism'. This is a perspective which it may be useful to reappraise today, her work suggests; even as her work also develops sympathetic and affective modes of alliance with objects; refusing some of the more overt artistic models of critique or resistance which are associated with earlier twentieth-century avant-gardes. The animation of objects, she shows, is a technique long rehearsed in commodity culture, and that is, in some sense, structurally indispensable to it. At the same time, the visual strategies that Price develops invite comparison with earlier artists' works and point to a history of artistic engagement with objects of considerable ambivalence. Our longing for the object to represent a 'life' that in some sense exceeds our own, this history suggests,

while it must be understood as a function of an economic system dependent on inequality, may also be seen as something that points beyond it.

In this sense, we may understand Price's work as extending a caution: reminding us of the dynamics of oppression and irrationality that are imbricated in our relationships with the objects that surround us, and the economic structures in which they are inscribed; but at the same time, refusing to hold a position that imagines itself to be 'outside' or 'above' the structures of power and desire in which objects, like subjects, are inscribed. Price's work, I argue, develops a strategy that can be described using the idea of 'empathy with the commodity': an affective structure with a strongly ambivalent dynamic, oscillating between a sympathetic and liberatory impulse, and a destructive, death-driven one. In so doing, Price's work helps to constitute a larger historical context for itself: establishing references and continuities not only to Kruger or, I shall suggest, Dara Birnbaum, but beyond these figures, to the Dada artist, Hannah Höch, to Surrealist film, and Neue Sachlichkeit photographers, like Albert Renger-Patzsch. These references to the period of the 1930s, in particular, and Price's placing of these in relation to a history of artistic and feminist engagement with the culture of consumer capitalism, suggest new insight into our present historical moment.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the questions I want to ask are as follows. What kind of history of artistic engagement with the commodity does Price's work construct, and how does it shed new light on more recent theoretical engagements with objects? How does Price's work help us to understand the specificity of our present moment, and the ways in which it develops from the previous century? What does this history suggest is at stake for us now in the 'life' of the object?

### 1. Joy before the object

Interest in, and theorization of commodity objects was a key feature of avant-garde movements of the 1920s and '30s. The cultivation of an excessive, desiring relation to the object was central to the Surrealist project, for example. We might recall Georges Bataille's famous challenge, defying the art lover to 'love a picture the way a fetishist loves a shoe'.<sup>14</sup> More directly addressing the

revolutionary potential of modern means of production, Constructivists sought to remake consumer objects as 'comrades' and 'co-workers' – flexible and dynamic prostheses for everyday life and activities; connecting their users to, rather than alienating them from the productive forces.<sup>15</sup> A third movement, more formally comparable to Price's work, perhaps, is *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography; a style which has been called the direct 'pictorial expression of commodity fetishism', by one writer, and that was famously criticized by Walter Benjamin for its lack of critical power.<sup>16</sup> Albert Renger-Patzsch, one of its leading practitioners, stressed pleasure as the goal of his photography: 'there must be an increase in the joy one takes in an object', he wrote, in an essay first published in January 1928; an injunction with evident commercial potential.<sup>17</sup> The techniques he developed furthered this aim by showing objects precisely, in crisp focus, accenting their lustre, and depicting them in gleaming and identical ranks, as well as in extreme close-up; all helping to increase their allure and stimulate consumer appetite for them, whilst also hinting at the ominous and awe-inspiring power of new productive capabilities (fig. 6).<sup>18</sup>

Price's use of black-and-white photography, her emphasis on dramatic tonal contrasts, crisp focus and the shine of polished surfaces all recall the look of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Like Renger-Patzsch, Price often emphasizes the shine of commodity objects; indeed, Price stresses this as a feature of her work, and of *USER GROUP DISCO* in particular, commenting that 'the various fantasies of the video are linked together by ... the material phenomenon of shine, occurring upon surfaces of chrome, vinyl, ceramic and glass'.<sup>19</sup> Although she links this quality of shine to the new technology of HD video – reporting that 'its clarity in recording the surfaces of objects is very strange – acute and toxic. I'm fascinated by it' – shine is an older phenomenon of a broader *photogénie*, as the example of *Neue Sachlichkeit* demonstrates: deployed by photographers in the early twentieth century as a marker of what was new and distinctive about their technology.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, the significance of 'shine' as an aesthetic quality is worthy of more extended treatment: as a marker of the action or 'touch' of light, 'shine' has operated as an index of verisimilitude in the history of painting, as well as a feature pointing to a transcendent, or transfiguring function. In the twentieth

century, 'shine' has a place in the theorization of fetishism: Freud's original essay discusses a patient's erotic fixation on a *Glanz auf der Nase*; something he at first interpreted as meaning a 'shine' on the nose, before realizing that the patient's childhood language of English meant the proper translation was a 'glance at the nose'.<sup>21</sup> The closeness of 'shine' to the German word *Schein* (to which it is etymologically related), meaning both 'shine' and 'appearance' or 'seeming', and the importance of this quality in Schiller's aesthetic theory, also point to the conceptual knot whereby 'shine' is closely bound up not only with vision and visuality per se, but also with what Schiller took to be the necessary dimension of illusion or falsehood in aesthetic experience.<sup>22</sup> This emphasis was taken forward by thinkers of the Frankfurt School, including Theodor Adorno, who, perhaps surprisingly, proposed fireworks as paradigmatic for the quality of 'becoming actual ... incandescently, in an expressive appearance' that he insisted is essential to the artwork; as well as Walter Benjamin, who in asking 'what, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism?', answered 'Not what the moving red neon sign says – but the fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt'.<sup>23</sup> What both single out is the capacity of what shines to spill over the limits of its form, to appear 'elsewhere' than, and in excess of the object, and this is cited as exemplary of what both take to be the necessary dimension of 'seeming' in the aesthetic, as precisely the location of its value; preserving what demystifying critiques would destroy.<sup>24</sup>

For her part, like Renger-Patzsch before her, Price deploys 'shine' in her presentation of objects in such a way as to intensify their allure for us: the gleaming lip of a ceramic mug arousing a desire in us to raise it to our mouths, for example. In this usage, shine lends the object a capacity to address us, to cause us to position our bodies in comportment with it, to seduce us.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Price's use of shine begins to *animate* the object. Building on this, Price's frequently comic use of text, to make the objects 'speak' their promises – in a version of the rhetorical technique called *prosopopeia* – draws out something that remains only implicit in the earlier artist's work: a fantasy concerning industrial design and manufacture: that it will be perfect, that it will never grow dull, that it will satisfy us forever, completely – and she exaggerates this, making it explicit, to the point where it becomes alarming and ridiculous.<sup>26</sup> 'We have



character. Yes! And intelligent drive. With freely programmable behavior all the way to the maximum permissible', boast the cars in *WEST HINDER*; seemingly unaware of the sly ironies in the words they have been given to say.

Renger-Patzsch, the Surrealists and Constructivists alike belonged to the first generation of artists and theorists responding to the early twentieth century's mass industrial production of objects, a burgeoning illustrated press, the expansion of advertising, and the establishing of a new, photographically supported society of consumer desire. In the postwar period there was a return to these themes, both among Pop artists, in the 1960s, and the post-pop, 'Pictures' generation of the 1970s and early '80s. Prominent among this generation were artists who employed the appropriation or mimicking of commercial advertising and spectacle in order to develop a feminist critique of media representations of women in particular; including Cindy Sherman, whose *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) imitate the style of popular Hollywood films; as well as the video artist Dara Birnbaum, each of whose early works identifies and clips out short, iconic features from popular television shows, usually focusing on images of women, and loops or repeats them, maximizing their impact. Price's use of pop music and, more unobtrusively, electronic commissioned scores, provided by the composer Jem Noble, which function to emphasize editorial cuts, suggests a comparison with the work of Birnbaum specifically, whose videos, such as the single-channel, 6-minute *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978/79) (fig. 7), typically isolate key, climactic moments in the source material, such as the moment when Linda Carter spins around to transform into Wonder Woman, heightening their effect by accompanying them with music.

The appropriation of TV footage, and the re-mixing of it to a bespoke, engineered soundtrack, was something also developed by Gretchen Bender, another moving-image artist to emerge from the 'Pictures' generation.<sup>27</sup> The work of Bender, a slightly younger artist, who began exhibiting in 1983, is unlike the typically single-channel late 1970s work of Birnbaum, in moving toward a more all-encompassing 'installation' format. Perhaps her most well-known piece, *Total Recall* (1987), is an 8-channel video work, deploying dozens of clips from television shows, corporate graphics and advertising, edited together in short, swift takes, combined with a specially designed soundtrack (fig. 8). Shown on

twenty-four monitors and three projection-screens, the images are sometimes synchronised across the different units – producing a flickering ‘whole-screen’ effect – and sometimes broken into different streams, in a complex collage.<sup>28</sup> The effect is demanding: a visual and aural composite that Bender herself described as ‘electronic theatre’.<sup>29</sup> Bender’s high-impact exhibition format, deploying the dramatic effects of darkness, aggressively fast editing and a percussive, synchronised use of sound, as well as her declamatory use of text in some pieces, make her work an important precedent for some of the features of Price’s installations.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, while Birnbaum and Bender alike pursued strategies, above all the use of music, to increase commodity allure, there is at least one respect in which Birnbaum’s single or two-channel videos of the late 1970s and early ‘80s bear closer comparison to the construction of Price’s works, which are likewise composed as single- (or, more recently, dual-) projections. Birnbaum’s videos, like *Wonder Woman* or the 5-minute, single-channel *Pop-Pop Video: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating* (1980), absorb the viewer into the images on-screen, where Bender’s *Total Recall*, with what has been described as its ‘signature, barrage-editing style’, forces the viewer out.<sup>31</sup> In particular, Birnbaum’s focus on isolating, prolonging and repeating key figural gestures – such as the rhythmic movements of the skaters, and distressed facial expressions of the actor in *General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating*, or what she highlights, for example, in another work, *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, from 1979, as ‘repetitive baroque neck-snapping triple takes, guffaws and paranoid eye darts’ – draws us closer to, and intensifies our fetishistic fascination with the figure.<sup>32</sup> This *re-animation* of the televisual body is comparable I want to suggest to the way in which Price deploys techniques of *prosopopeia* and shine: fundamentally to invest her objects with an altered and renewed sense of life.

Indeed, it is precisely Birnbaum’s drawing-closer to the commodified image that has caused some writers to worry, despite Birnbaum’s avowed deconstructive intent: where is the criticality in these works? Is there any at all?<sup>33</sup> In T.J. Demos’s recent book on Birnbaum, for example, focusing on *Wonder Woman*, he detects, in place of critical content, something more ‘affirmative’, or at least ‘ambivalent’: ‘Birnbaum’s piece does not exactly represent a simple

attack on Wonder Woman', he writes. 'There is an element of fascination that remains evident ... maintaining and even heightening the show's visual power.'<sup>34</sup> Demos is right, I think to point to the effect of ambiguity that Birnbaum's works achieve. Arguably the reason why a work like *Wonder Woman* has proven so enduring is precisely the visual pleasure it affords and its ensuing critical undecidability. Nevertheless, he does not go on to suggest how we might theorize this as a specific artistic strategy.

The fear of the abandonment of critique haunts the reception of both pre- and postwar artists concerned with the commodity – marking the reception of Renger-Patzsch, as we have seen, as well as that of Hannah Höch, whose pioneering photo-collages of the 1920s and '30s, also often focusing on contemporary mass-market images of women, have raised similar questions for commentators: are they critiquing or celebrating their sources?<sup>35</sup> Such questions may seem old to us now, even as they were revived, we have seen, in the debates around postmodernism of the 1980 and '90s; and yet, as the objections voiced by Demos and more recently, arguments mounted by Hal Foster, demonstrate, they are still by no means resolved.<sup>36</sup> Like Höch, Birnbaum and, to an extent, Bender, Price employs techniques to draw closer to the object, and to expose the hold it has over the subject. How should we interpret this? Birnbaum, I think, points a way forward: her interest in *re-animating* the commodified image producing a dynamic instability in the work's meaning; an effect I want to characterize as one simultaneously of intensification and unbinding. To investigate this further, I suggest we look more closely at Price's *USER GROUP DISCO*, in which we see all of the features of her practice that I have identified so far.

## 2. Disco

*USER GROUP DISCO* was created during a residency at Spike Island, Bristol, where it was also first shown, in 2009, before being exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, and touring the UK in the British Art Show the following year. A 15-minute, single-screen projected HD video, it opens by showing us a collection of miscellaneous technical devices and domestic consumer gadgets (fig. 9). Text appears on-screen: 'We shall designate this place

/ this place here / a Hall of Sculptures. / Let us show you'. In their superfluity of detail and outlandish alleged 'uses', the kinds of objects pictured seem well captured by Jean Baudrillard's description of 'gizmos': 'objects... that are at once incredibly specific in their function and absolutely useless', such as, for example, 'a solar-powered egg opener'. 'What is one to say', Baudrillard wonders, of 'the ultrasound washing-up machine ... the toaster with a nine-level browning control, or the electric cocktail swizzle-stick? ... Words like "gizmo" now cover all those things which, on account of their specialization and because they answer to no true collective need, cannot be referred to as machines, and thus assume a mythological character.'<sup>37</sup>

The glimpses we get of each gadget suggest that they form one linked, intelligent assemblage: the electronic pet food dispenser connected to the executive golf-putting toy for some inscrutable purpose. This impression is supported by the text which unscrolls onscreen, deploying Price's usual corporate 'we': 'We are the sum total of our collective labor. Organized in divisions', it announces. What kind of machine is formed here? The idea is proposed that the assemblage encodes a 'worldview', or ideology, and our task is to decipher it. 'A taxonomy is not simply a neutral system for classifying specimens', the text warns. 'It implicitly embodies a theory of the universe'. These words unfurl across a section showing various Art Deco china cups, with decorative patterns of black dots, which in the context established by the text, combined with their constant rotation, conjure associations with spinning planets and cosmological models. The decorative dots seem both ancient and modern, collapsing the temporal distance between digital code and ancient hieroglyphics or symbols.

Presented in gleaming black and white, the video recalls specific examples of Surrealist film and photography. The luminous, shaking egg-whisk and coffee-frother, for example, invoke Man Ray's rayograms of domestic objects as well as his photographs of clothes pegs and an egg whisk analogized to the human body, *Man and Woman*, of 1918. The constant swinging movement Price employs recalls Ferdinand Léger and Dudley Murphy's *Ballet Mécanique* (1923-24), in which first, a woman on a swing, and then a shiny metal ball moving towards and away from the camera which is reflected in its surface, establish a hectic beat,

amounting to an urgent, agitated pulse.<sup>38</sup> In *USER GROUP DISCO* the pace seems more controlled, yet it is still eroticized and constant. Everything in Price's video is in motion, swinging in a tight, rocking arc, or fully rotating, first clockwise then counter-clockwise, as if all objects had been set on a record turntable, or rotating display device. The tone of this first section of the work is playful: the rapid, flashing glimpses we are offered making ordinary objects seem both extraordinary and hilarious.

Across this Surrealist domestic catalogue, Price's text paraphrases a line from Theodor Adorno's short essay on the art object in *Minima Moralia* to sum up the ensemble: 'We know well / That works of art can shock the unwary / By their relation to accumulated domestic monstrosities', it notes drily.<sup>39</sup> And then, in a departure from Adorno's text, it adds, '[s]o we should warn you before we proceed – monsters have not been eradicated.' The intercut glimpses of each machine are synchronized and punctuated by machine noises – for example, at one point, the shrill beep of the electronic pet food dispenser. This is a notably comic moment – Price's works are funny; and this is important to their effect simultaneously of intensification and unbinding, as much as it is testament to the precision of her timing throughout.

This tone changes in the middle section, however, focusing on a spinning vinyl record (fig. 10). For example, says the text, look at this: it is an object 'already too old not to present us with riddles'. The line is a quotation from Adorno's essay, 'The Form of the Phonograph Record'. First published in 1934, it is a key document of the early twentieth century's theoretical and artistic grappling with the commodity.<sup>40</sup> Price's work developed, she has said, in response to Adorno's essay; in particular, responding to what she has called its 'prophetic tone and paternal attitude'.<sup>41</sup> Heralding the vinyl record as 'perhaps the first of the technological artistic inventions', Adorno describes it thus (and Price quotes his words on-screen): 'A black pane made of a composite mass which these days no longer has its honest name ... It is covered with curves, a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing ... structured like a spiral'.<sup>42</sup> Like the photograph, Adorno says, phonograph records perform a similar flattening and stripping of the full three dimensions of reality; depriving music of its spatial and 'best dimension', its 'height and its abyss', as he says.<sup>43</sup> But like the photograph,

the phonograph record absorbs into itself this lost life, and holds it there, converting it into *writing* and so possessing a latent power that might at some point be unleashed.

This account of a phonograph record by Adorno derives of course from Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, according to which the life that the commodity appears to have stems from the alienation of the worker's labour-power, which is invested in the object.<sup>44</sup> This accounts for the uncanniness of commodities: a sense of the suppressed life encoded in them that might yet be released, bringing the object into animation. The remedy Marx proposed was to revolutionize labor relations and thus restore non-alienated relations among people and objects alike. The interests of artists, however, as we have seen, have historically been more varied and ambiguous: sometimes concerned not so much rationally to demystify this appearance, as instead, affectively to intensify it, to the point of absurdity and beyond.

For her part, Price imprints Adorno's words from the 'Phonograph' essay, or a version of them, across spinning images of the record revolving on its turntable, and combining them, as she acknowledges, with 'an excerpt from a description of a whirlpool by Edgar Allen Poe': 'a wide waste of liquid ebony / all whirling and plunging / ... in precipitous descent'.<sup>45</sup> The soundtrack here is a grinding, metallic, ominous noise, and thus Price draws out the doom-laden element in Adorno's analysis, audibly realizing the whirlpool that Adorno evokes metaphorically. In this way, her work does not merely reiterate Adorno's discussion, but rather, she 'sonifies', or animates it, bringing it to life, and combining it with her own more playful engagement with mass culture; as we see in the next section. The tension that has been produced in the record section is dramatically released. The grinding machine noises build to a climax and then suddenly stop: the revolving record disappears and we are shown a black screen. Then we see words and objects floating across the screen. Items of domestic (non-) utility are introduced, with the motion-graphics giving us with a flourish their full names and titles as if they were guests arriving at a ball, and music begins.

The objects are released from their strict, horizontal rotation, to become suddenly free-floating, swinging up, down and around across the screen. This

sudden liberation of the objects is funny and almost joyful, linking to the liberatory emotional effect of the music: the euphoric pop of A-Ha's 1984 hit, *Take On Me*. The music is a Karaoke version. We might not notice the absence of the lead singer at first – because unconsciously, we supply the lead vocals, inserting our own voices into the music. This is vital to the effect of ideological fusion in this sequence: we sing the music; we become 'the choir'. In their turn, the objects now seem to 'dance', as if animated. Price manipulates their movements so they seem in time to the music, in an example of a technique used widely in advertising, and in music videos since the 1980s, known as 'cutting to the beat'. For example, the swinging handle of the salad-spinner rotates rhythmically in time with the percussive pulse. This action of swinging is crucial – just as it was in Dara Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman*, where we saw Linda Carter repeatedly twisting around, and transforming into Wonder Woman, accompanied by explosions and blinding flashes of light. In both cases, the twist serves to *release* the libidinal energy that is invested in the commodity fetish, and that Adorno described as cooped up in the vinyl record, with an explosive energy.

The 'twist' or swinging movement may be identified as a third device, or technical specification, alongside 'shine' and *prosopopeia*, that Price's work isolates, in the extended analysis of commodity fetishism that I argue her work may be understood as undertaking. We might link it to that movement of deflection described in Freud's original essay on fetishism, as the child's gaze swerves away from the sight of the mother's genitals, which it must disavow; or to the *clinamen*, or swerve, which Harold Bloom describes as one of the means by which the poet is enabled to escape the overwhelming, dominating effect of a predecessor.<sup>46</sup> In each of these cases, the swerve is a movement that enables the subject to escape fixity, paralysis, and domination; and in each of these cases, too, it represents a mis-perception of the world that is necessary to this escape. Shine, voicing and twist are thus all techniques of animation, functioning to bestow on objects a seeming life: 'voice' seeming to speak the objects' thoughts and desires; 'gleam' or shine a quality associated with lifelikeness; and the twist or swerve a condensed emblem of movement. By materializing the idea of the objects possessing a hidden life, and having them appear to dance, Price's playful

anthropomorphism conjures up exhilarated responses in us. Even as we are made to realize and to fear the forces that slumber in material objects, we are also made somehow to laugh at them.

It is here that it becomes important to distinguish Price's approach from that taken by some other contemporary artists and theorists. In the recent exhibition catalogue, *Animism: Modernity Through the Looking Glass*, for example, Anselm Franke and Isabelle Stengers explore the potential of what they term 'animism' as a technique of bringing to life, or animation, to enable a strategic thinking from the place of the object, in order to undo oppressive political structures of objectification. Animism in this sense is seen as a technique that can liberate. 'Animism is ... not a belief in inert objects "having" a soul', Franke writes, 'it is a way of knowing by way of subjectification – a practice that *accounts* for the primacy of communication and relationality, and the designs that things have on us.'<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Stengers writes, '[r]eclaiming animism is not reclaiming the "idea" of animism ... It is rather a matter of recovering the capacity to honor experience, any experience we care for, as "not ours" but rather as "animating" us, making us witness to what is *not* us.'<sup>48</sup>

While this may describe the approach taken by some artists, it is important to recognise that 'animation' as Price develops it is rather different. The objects she films can only 'speak' with the words we've given them, she makes clear: their 'life' nevertheless now confronting us with unpredictable results. This is not so much about 'subjectifying' the objects under her gaze, as releasing a part-life that has been alienated from us, and allowing it to run. The result is a performance of 'life' that remains a rhetorical figure only: the 'life-like'. 'Animatedness' as the *appearance* of life is what is produced here; and as such it is something, as Sianne Ngai has pointed out, that is understood as necessarily subordinate.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps this is all we are able to conjure from objects, Price's work suggests. Indeed, we might see this foreshadowed in Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman*. The central figure's limited mobility, confined in her tight, circular twist, promises transformation but never really changes. This is an image-object perpetually in stasis, but offering the spectacle of movement. Its essential quality is a fluidity, a 'plasmaticity', to quote Sergei Eisenstein's analysis of Disney, that, however, remains within bounds.<sup>50</sup>



Teaching objects to dance is a task sometimes described by contemporary critics as one solution aesthetic form can find, in relation to capitalism – T.J. Clark and Hal Foster, in different essays published since the millennium, have both quoted the idea of ‘teach[ing] petrified forms to dance’ from Marx, offering this as a suggestion for one way in which art can work with, rather than in simple opposition to, the forms produced within capitalism.<sup>51</sup> With a bleaker insight, the work of Birnbaum and Price makes plain that what is at stake in ‘teaching objects to dance’ may be a performance of obedience as much, if not more than, emancipation. Nevertheless, in both Price and Birnbaum’s work, within or precisely because of the limitations each exhibits, an experience of elation is conjured, deriving apparently from something dizzying within the work: some prospect of imminent catastrophe or conflagration (the vertigo in Birnbaum, the whirlpool in Price). Christian Thorne, in his essay, ‘The Revolutionary Energy of the Outmoded’ has pointed to something similar, in describing the frantic energy, the frenzy that can be released, in slapstick; as objects appear to begin an infernal dance with human beings.<sup>52</sup> Slapstick, which developed as a specifically filmic tradition in the early twentieth century, from earlier roots in physical theatre, itself relies on a precisely regimented choreography; even as this choreography unfolds precisely to confound and exasperate the hapless subject who is caught up in it.<sup>53</sup> This is its particular appeal, we might surmise: pointing to a capacity in dominated and ordinary objects to resist or refuse our uses for them, to overthrow the programme and intentions of the subject. Indeed, it is perhaps in this, as Siegfried Kracauer suggested, that its most exhilarating and emancipatory potential may be glimpsed.<sup>54</sup> Something of the sort is seen also in Price’s work, I want to suggest.

### 3. Waste

This potential is most evident, perhaps, in Price’s *WEST HINDER* (fig. 11-12), a 22-minute, single-screen video that uses a mixture of digital rendering, in-line graphics and material shot on HD video, in imaginative response to a news story Price read about a cargo of luxury cars that sank to the bottom of the English Channel when the freight ship transporting them was holed. First shown

in *HERE* at the BALTIC, and again later that year at the Whitechapel Gallery, the seabed appears a protean underworld in this work, spawning the transformation of the cars into animate creatures, who speak and make love, in what seems a creaturely mimicry of the automaticity of industrial production. We are shown cars swimming in what seems like amniotic fluid, as if they were emergent life forms. There is no surfacing from the element they live in; there is no 'outside', no need of oxygen. Writing appears across the screen, unfolding at the speed of the viewer's reading. Unusually, the text is also spoken, in voiceover; using the multiple artificial voices of a computer programme, speaking in unison. The script uses the characteristic anonymous and collective 'we' of all Price's works, speaking in words drawn from car manuals, advertising and press releases. There is an address to 'you' as the consumer, whom the cars promise to satisfy – their assurances becoming more threatening as the work goes on.

Toward the end of the video, the cars begin to dance, as if in a synchronized swimming routine by Busby Berkeley.<sup>55</sup> Once again, as in *USER GROUP DISCO*, the dance sequence is funny, even as Price also builds an atmosphere of unease. A song plays from their radios: *Follow You Follow Me* by Genesis, from 1978. Price says she 'wanted to use a ubiquitous macho "drive" song. A song for driving. And although I don't really like this genre of music, I think this is a powerful, memorable track. The reprising melody is really strong, suggestive of returning currents and motion. ... I do try to use songs with an effective, generic pop sentiment ... and to connect that strange, strong attachment or feeling to another drive.'<sup>56</sup> The lyrics of the song, echoed by the cars, 'we will follow you', sound menacing, but backed by the music as a surging libidinal affirmation, become something ecstatic. Watching and listening, the viewer is gripped by the coercive articulation of desires – for cars, for the illusion of autonomy produced by driving, and for something more nameless, which these luxury cars and the music somehow represent; an experience which is counterpointed by the comic transcription of desires to the cars themselves, as they appear to swim toward each other, and to communicate with each other. The sexual longing of the music is voiced by the cars as if lip-synching. We have taught these creatures our own behaviours and now they mime them in underwater ballet.

*WEST HINDER* is an exhilarating and ominous work: a grim affective blend which, we might reflect, is typical of our particular, simultaneously authoritarian and seductive moment in commodity culture (and which might be said to mark it out, indeed, when compared with earlier forms).<sup>57</sup> Emily Apter has pointed to the deepening hold that ecological catastrophe now exerts over our contemporary imaginations, bringing what she proposes as a kind of thanatropic undertow to particular cultural works that is somehow seductive.<sup>58</sup> In similar spirit, Price's video offers a display of spectacular waste, an extravagant landscape of non-use, in the form of all these expensive cars, now lying at the bottom of the sea. There is a thrill in the confounding of 'use-value' that this represents. As Maurizia Boscagli has pointed out, in modern consumer culture 'there is an obsession with garbage and its management', which is born, she suggests, 'of the fear that the residue might overwhelm us.'<sup>59</sup> And yet, that the end-point or *telos* of our pleasure in consumption is, precisely, waste, was a point first set out by Surrealist writer, Georges Bataille, in his essay, 'The Notion of Expenditure' (1933), explaining as he sees it the 'insufficiency of the principle of classical utility' to describe our practices of object consumption. Spectacular waste and destruction are essential to establishing social relations of exchange, he argues. In general, men are ceaselessly engaged in practices of 'nonproductive expenditure', of which the fundamental principle or drive is an illogical, irrational imperative of *loss*.<sup>60</sup>

Agreeing but moving beyond Bataille's arguments around *potlatch*, Jean Baudrillard in his turn took up the argument that our relations to objects are more irrational and dominated than the idea of 'use' can describe; developing his arguments in relation to the postwar context of intensified consumerism. The central axis of Baudrillard's thought is the subject-object relation, although this emphasis in his work is often forgotten. Beginning with his first book, *The System of Objects*, published in 1968, and continuing throughout his later writings, Baudrillard's constant aim is to unsettle and reverse conventional models of our relations to objects, whether found in Marxism, psychoanalysis or sociology. Specifically, in *The System of Objects*, his argument is that in late capitalism, we witness an unprecedented proliferation (a 'luxuriant growth', or 'pullulation') of objects; as a result of which objects gain increasing autonomy and independence

of human needs.<sup>61</sup> The increasing efficiency and perfection of our technical objects leads in turn to a quasi-autonomy of their evolving design, and the superfluity of the human beings who operate them. In proportion as the object-world increases its perfection, Baudrillard posits, human beings lose their coherence, their abilities, and their rationality.<sup>62</sup>

Accordingly, objects gain a power of 'seduction' over human subjects. The risk is that the increasingly autonomous 'system of objects' will subsume and foreclose our libidinal energies. Under these conditions, he offers an interesting argument as to why we need our objects to fail:

A technical hitch infuriates us, but an avalanche of technical hitches can fill us with glee; if a jug develops a crack we are pained, but if it smashes to smithereens there is satisfaction in it. Our reaction to an object's failure is in fact always ambiguous. This failure threatens our well being, yet ... one has merely to imagine an infallible object and the disillusion it would inevitably entail ... in order to realize that infallibility invariably generates anxiety. The fact is that a world without fallibility would imply the definitive resorption of an inevitable fate – and hence of sexuality. That is why we greet the slightest hint of a resurgence of fatefulness with a deep satisfaction: the slightest breach allows sexuality to revive, even if for only a moment, even if its emergence takes the form of a hostile force (as it always does in this context), and even if its emergence in such circumstances means failure, death and destruction.<sup>63</sup>

So, paradoxically, we welcome the destruction of our objects because it is only in such breakdown that our buried libido can revive and return to us. It is a restoration of 'life' in some other sense than that of our mere material survival, or that may even be at odds with it.

Throughout his philosophy, as this example indicates, Baudrillard urges a strategy that is 'beyond critique', but that is not, as a result, merely affirmative of the contradictions of consumer culture. Instead he proposes a strategy of intensification or superlativism: an effort he describes as striving for 'the truer

than true, the more beautiful than beautiful', even the 'more commodity than commodity'; and that he also calls 'outpacing' ('we must outpace events, which themselves long ago outpaced liberation').<sup>64</sup> Philosophically, this strategy has a certain amount in common with what has recently been called 'accelerationism'; associated with the work of Benjamin Noys and Steven Shaviro; and itself linked to recent object-theory (Shaviro has written on them both).<sup>65</sup> Accelerationism is split, or veers between a teleological doctrine that seeks to hasten the collapse of capitalism by exacerbating its internal tensions and crises, and a more neutral description of the intensification of market economics and capital accumulation as intrinsic to late capitalism, without necessarily assuming this will lead to anything better emerging.

The latter is closer to Baudrillard's account of 'outpacing', in which intensification is a dynamic belonging to events, with which we can only fall into line – a kind of law of unintended consequences, or 'logic of catastrophe', which he also calls, more humourously, a '*Witz* [joke] of events' – which can be counted on to screw things up.<sup>66</sup> And yet, as these emphases indicate, Baudrillard differs from much accelerationist commentary in that his work does not simply glory in the oppressive effects of the 'outpacing' he describes: rather, he points beneath and beyond these, to our continuing desire for liberation from these oppressions. Fundamentally, for Baudrillard, there is no forward 'goal': intensification and catastrophe are inevitable. Nevertheless, what he describes is a faith that no system can be total, no form of oppression permanent. The 'life' of objects, in the form of their failure and imperfection, represents the prospect of change arising from what already exists, and so, finally, of freedom, above all from ourselves.

This is a perspective – encompassing the push-pull contradictions of our aggressive drives towards objects, and even something like a death-drive undergirding our consumption of commodities – which is strikingly absent from many 'new materialist' discussions of our relations to objects, including those which engage our most nakedly self-destructive behaviors, for example, in relation to the environment (Apter's essay, previously mentioned, is an important exception).<sup>67</sup> It is a perspective I want to suggest we might see as developed in Price's work, however, most notably in *THE WOOLWORTHS CHOIR OF 1979* (fig. 13-15). This 18-minute, single-projection, HD video focuses on the

subject of the 'choir', in a double sense meaning both a feature of English church architecture and human singers, illustrated by archival video footage of the Shangri-La's. In a section combining the two, we are shown a church's tomb sculpture and sepulchral effigies. We see bodies lying under shields, with their arms crossed and hands folded – echoing the curving lines of the girl-group's gestures, which we've been seeing all the way through. The on-screen text explains: 'We know that the greatest emotional expression attaches to a conspicuous twist of the right wrist, yet it is difficult to discern what the gesture means.'

The statue images are then folded into an extended sequence of the girl group footage – we see the Shangri-La's dancing, in slowed-down, grainy sequences. In this section, the music that has been a burgeoning presence throughout the work, now floods into full chorus. We see swaying bodies and gesturing hands, with a loud, distorted sine wave on the sound track, interfering with the noise of the music. The hands and bodies move in the same sinuous lines we have seen carved in stone. The on-screen text becomes loud and affirmative, coloured red, in capitals: WE ARE QUIRE.<sup>68</sup> There is a direct elision of the women as choir with the ornamental forms of church architecture. The mood is euphoric, yet also forbidding.

Price's video thus constructs an archaeological layering, mixing the archaism of old black-and-white photographs, medieval church architecture, and 1960s girl bands, with a Phil Spector-ish 'wall of sound', to identify, in Warburgian fashion, a libidinal energy coursing through these cultural forms, expressed in the serpentine line. Once excavated, it is as if the video works to set this energy free from its various settings. The gestures of the singers seem incantatory, and through Price's editing, we see the central singer, in particular, with the wave of her hands seeming first to summon up the building energy of the humming sine wave; and once it's conjured, to set everything else swaying in time with it.

Price's technique of combining footage from various different sources might seem to make her work a representative of that 'archival aesthetic' identified by Hal Foster as a significant feature of contemporary art.<sup>69</sup> And yet the form of the 'archive' seems too inert a description. Instead, the construction

of the video seems more like an exorcism; in a sense, perhaps comparable to strategies explored by the German art historian of the 1930s, Carl Einstein, in his writings on Surrealism and prehistoric art.<sup>70</sup> The energy that has been set free courses through these cultural forms and culminates in the final section, in the oddly languorous waving hands of people trapped in a burning building, reaching out of the windows. This is documentary footage of the fire that consumed the Manchester branch of the department store, Woolworths, in 1979, in which ten people died. The work as a whole functions to excavate buried energy, which in this case is felt as an effect of horror. The finger-clicks, handclaps and stamps become apocalyptic portents, and the fire happens – as if this were the truth of industrial production and consumption, its necessary outcome.<sup>71</sup>

Is Price's work accelerationist? My suggestion that her work draws out a hidden drive toward waste and destruction in our patterns of commodity consumption might seem to link her to that movement.<sup>72</sup> And yet in the end Price's approach seems a world away: formally controlled and exacting, developing specific legacies, as we have seen, from modernist photography and film in order to repurpose these to humorous and critical effect. Fundamentally, Price's satirical sense of what is absurd in our relationship with objects – something, I have shown, she shares with Baudrillard – combined with her empathetic sense of alliance with them, helps us understand accelerationism itself in relation to a longer historical tradition: first, the avant-garde engagement with the commodity and technologies of mechanical reproduction in the early twentieth century, including *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography. Then, second, the postwar reprise of this engagement, in the 1960s and '70s, as the Pop and post-Pop generation of Pictures artists such as Dara Birnbaum and Gretchen Bender developed strategies for the mimicking and intensification of commodity allure, in order to open this out as a new vehicle of affectively-rooted and specifically feminist critique.

What this represents, I propose, is a lineage of artists' involvement with the psychic structure of commodity fetishism, and the alienation from which it arises. Looking back at the history I've traced, it seems there always was an attempt to situate the artwork precisely 'there' where we have put our alienated

energies, and then, by means of strategies inciting empathetic response and identification, to aim at the recouping or re-absorption of this energy. This is to be distinguished from artistic efforts to demystify or overcome alienation. It is a tradition premised instead upon aesthetic effects of intensified alienation and estrangement, in order to retrieve what is buried within alienation that is utopian: a longing for life beyond existing subject-object relations. Accordingly, it is focused not simply on an oppositional critique of the commodity, but rather the critical amplification of its effects. Deploying the three-fold technique of animation I have described, Price intensifies our libidinal investment in commodity fetishes, releasing this energy from its rational uses to become more free-floating, unfixed and unpredictable.

The gesture this inspires is one of reaching out to the object, in which is inscribed the aspiration to a life beyond our own; and as such, it has something, if not utopian, then liberation-driven in it. This is particularly seen in Price's approach to images of women. Perhaps the key work where this is developed is *SUNLIGHT*, a two-screen work first shown at the Focal Point Gallery in Southend-On-Sea in 2013 (fig. 16). In its original installation, the two screens were placed close together and at right angles to each other, one in vertical and one in horizontal orientation, opposite two wooden benches, composed of modular, geometric units and painted bright yellow. The lightly Constructivist appearance of this display – reminiscent of the latticed chairs and angled desks of Rodchenko's Worker's Reading Room – chimed with the black-and-white athleticism of the imagery on-screen, in which photographs of hosiery models, from Wolford tights packets, were combined with close-up, black-and-white photographs of the sun, in flickering montage.<sup>73</sup> The hosiery models became, in Price's words on-screen, her 'protagonists': action-figures in Price's montaged editing; their bodies turned around, and flipped upside-down (fig. 17). Over its duration, the video seemed to portray an active enabling of the fantasies of joy and strength incarnated in these advertising images; even as the commentary supplied by Price's gallery on her use of these photographs describes them as portraying 'young women in highly expressive, stylised poses of fear, dread or despair ... pictured shielding their eyes; apparently from the camera and/or the sun'.<sup>74</sup>



Price's strategy in this work is one we might compare, for example, to the use made of the image of the 'New Woman' in the photo-collages of Hannah Höch, or Birnbaum's dwelling on Wonder Woman's turn and gestures. In each of these cases, as in Price's other works, animating consumer objects, it's a gesture that turns on a dime and is fully ambivalent, seeking on the one hand to understand and help the commodified objects and women realize the life they promise, and which they incarnate in their own strange and distinctive forms, while on the other, exposing the ridiculousness of the result: the awkward gracelessness of the dancing household gadgets and the naïve enthusiasm of their recycled consumer rhetoric; the 'athleticism' represented by the extraordinarily restricted and contorted poses of the women, and their gestures of fear; the clumsy manipulations of the luxury cars speaking their user manuals and advertising slogans aloud.

For after all, if commodities could speak to us, what would they say? A history of shame and humiliation would unfold, Price suggests. These objects designed for our consumption speak of the ways they have been used by us; a history that is inseparable from the ways in which women's bodies have been allied to commodities, and made the insignia for the desires they elicit. Recent feminist theory has begun to explore the idea of identification with the object as a possible mode of escape from the pitfalls of the subject(ed) position.<sup>75</sup> 'How about siding with the object for a change? Why not affirm it? Why not be a thing? An object without a subject? A thing among other things?' Hito Steyerl asks, tongue-in-cheek.<sup>76</sup> Price's work lays bare the cost of such an 'identification with the object': her investigation of the possibility taking on meaningfulness and depth, in part through her refusal to relinquish the specification of the object as commodity. In such an identification, she proposes, we may indeed recognize a longing for freedom, though the form it takes is its own indictment.

As such, Price's work helps shed light on the older idea of 'empathy with the commodity', discussed briefly by Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project*.<sup>77</sup> Benjamin illustrates the idea with the example of a male customer's 'love' for a prostitute, which, he proposed, represented 'the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity'.<sup>78</sup> But its implications go wider than this example suggests. In German aesthetic theory of the early twentieth century, empathy was a key term;

deriving from an idea introduced by Robert Vischer in 1873.<sup>79</sup> As developed by Wilhelm Worringer, in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), empathy describes a deeper urge beneath our responses to artistic form, to flee the self, to escape the confines of individual personality, human frailty and contingency. He calls this a fundamental drive to 'self-alienation', which lies at the root of our aesthetic responses.<sup>80</sup> What is interesting in this analysis is its negative psychological dimension: going beyond orthodox Marxist theory, such as the account of reification offered by Georg Lukács, in which relations between people are mistakenly taken for relations between things, and reaching instead into the more complex psychic realms of the sacrificial anthropology of Bataille and Marcel Mauss (so influential for Baudrillard); explored also in the 1930s by Bataille's fellow member of the Collège de Sociologie, Roger Caillois, whose essay on 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', describes similarly a drive toward non-being as lying at the core of the subject's relations to the object-world.<sup>81</sup>

Here we are returned to Baudrillard and to slapstick: both positing a liberation in the prospect of catastrophe: a swinging, vertiginous energy of 'reversibility', which governs events and our relations with the world. Slapstick prompts our identification with objects, too, and incites a giddy pleasure in the reversal of power-relations they effect, even if or perhaps especially when this comes at the cost of the subject's downfall. This is a drive that takes on new salience today, I suggest, as planetary destruction becomes the inescapable horizon of our thinking. In the wider work of Price, Höch and Birnbaum, we see the variously liberatory and destructive drives that orient our affective investments in objects explored, together with the exhilaration these produce: in Price's *SUNLIGHT*, taking the form of sun-blindness, or fire in *THE WOOLWORTHS CHOIR*; in Höch's collages, the mutilation of the figures (the cut-off legs, heads and disembodied eyes which are multiplied through the works), and in Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman*, the vertigo which the work induces (the dizzying spinning of the figure, combined with flashing lights).

'Empathy with the commodity' represents a strategy with a long history, as I have attempted to sketch here; tracing its lineage through pre- and postwar art, emphasizing the work in particular of Höch and Birnbaum. But it is developed to the point of recognition only in contemporary work such as Price's,

where it takes on new salience under the conditions of our late-capitalist endgame, permitting us not only to look back at and to reconstrue work of the previous century differently, but also to understand our present moment more deeply. The universe Price conjures recognizes the structural inequality of the object as presented to us in our present economic system and the sense in which its life stands against us, in antagonism to our own. Indeed, Price insists on this dimension of antagonism, as the only potential route of escape from a world dominated by the presently-existing subject and its needs and agendas. This is a fully (to use Baudrillard's term) 'reversible' technique, releasing a powerful and unstable set of affects, charged with both negative and positive energy. Subject-object relations are not easily overturned, Price's work suggests, but we can be attentive to what in us longs for a life that extends beyond or outside our own.

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<sup>1</sup> Price continued to work on both *THE CHOIR* and *WEST HINDER* after their exhibition at the BALTIC, and *THE CHOIR* was shown in the Turner Prize exhibition, extended from 15 to 20 minutes, as *THE WOOLWORTHS CHOIR OF 1979*, later in 2012. When not discussing the specific BALTIC installation, I will use the later title.

<sup>2</sup> For *USER GROUP DISCO*, for example, an Epsom EH TW 3200, with a contrast ratio of 25,000:1, was chosen. Information about the installation provided by Alessandro Vincentelli of the BALTIC, in email correspondence with the author.

<sup>3</sup> Speakers used included Nexo PS15 – for *USER GROUP DISCO* – and JBL Control 8SR 175w – for *WEST HINDER*. Information supplied to the author in email correspondence by Alessandro Vincentelli of the BALTIC.

<sup>4</sup> 'Mad Love: Elizabeth Price interviewed by Paul O'Neill', *Art Monthly*, 326, May 2009, 2.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Mad Love', 5.

<sup>6</sup> Price, quoted in Tom Morton and Lisa LeFeuvre eds, *British Art Show 7: In the Days of the Comet*, London, 2010, 138.

<sup>7</sup> 'Mad Love', 4.

<sup>8</sup> The reference to Carpenter was made by the artist in an interview with the author.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA, 1993; Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 28:1, 2001, 1-22; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC, 2010. The turn has prompted a wave of related thing-studies in the humanities, such as Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things*, Cambridge, MA, 2008; Sherry Turkle ed., *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Cambridge, MA, 2007. For a summary discussion of the implications of this turn for the humanities, and art history in particular, see 'A Questionnaire on Materialisms', *October* 155, Winter 2016, 3-110.

<sup>10</sup> On strategic anthropomorphism see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 98-99.

<sup>11</sup> An exception is Maurizia Boscagli's *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism*, London, 2014, which unusually attempts to combine the perspectives of object-theory with historical materialism. One of the earliest publications in what can be identified, in retrospect, as the new field of object studies, also maintained the term 'commodity'; see Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, Cambridge, 1986.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Jordana Rosenberg, 'The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present', *Theory & Event*, 17:2, 2014, <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed October 29, 2018), and Andrew Cole, 'Those Obscure Objects of Desire: The Uses and Abuses of Object-Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism', *Artforum*, Summer, 2015, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201506/the-uses-and-abuses-of-object-oriented-ontology-and-speculative-realism-andrew-cole-52280> (accessed October 29, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> The question of the relationship of contemporary art to the 1930s is work that I am taking forward in my current book project. For helpful discussion of some of these issues, see Larne Abse Gogarty, 'Coherence and Complicity: On the

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Wholeness of Post-Internet Aesthetics', lecture delivered at BAK (basis voor actuele kunst), March, 2018, available via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UaJyokkC6g&feature=youtu.be> (accessed October 29, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions' (1930), trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, in Dawn Ades and Simon Baker eds, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, London, 2006, 242. On the Surrealist object as a 'refusal of the *métier*', and a means to move beyond the separation between art and life, see Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics and the Psyche*, Cambridge, 2004, 15 and *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> For the description of the modern object as 'co-worker', see Boris Arvatov, 'Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing' (1925), trans. Christina Kiaer, *October* 81, Summer, 1997, 119-28. Christina Kiaer has analysed the Constructivist object in terms that emphasise certain commonalities with Surrealism,, arguing that 'Constructivism aims, in effect, to remake or harness the uncanny of the commodity – its ability to act as the *Doppelgänger* for the human producer – for socialist ends. ... [T]he socialist object would make a space within the uncanny (a home within the *unheimlich*) that could also be the site of release from or acknowledgement of the repressed desire [that the commodity houses].' Kiaer, 'Rodchenko in Paris', *October*, 75, Winter 1996, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Molderings, 'Urbanism and Technological Utopianism', in David Mellor ed., *Germany. The New Photography, 1927-1933*, London, 1978, 93. For Benjamin's criticisms of Neue Sachlichkeit, see his essay, 'Little History of Photography' (1931), trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934* ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, Cambridge, MA, 1999, 526.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Renger-Patzsch, 'Joy Before the Object' (1928), trans. Joel Agee, in Christopher Phillips ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, New York, 1989, 109.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, a number of his photographs were commissioned by industrial manufacturers and used for commercial promotions. For example, Renger-Patzsch accepted commissions from Scott glassworks, Schloemann apparatus

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manufacturers, and Goldschmidt AG before and during the Second World War. See Donald Kuspit ed., *Albert Renger-Patzsch: Joy Before the Object*, New York, 1993, 6, Gerda Breuer, 'Convincing Rather Than Persuading: On the Relationship between Object Photography and Product Design', in Thomas Seelig and Urs Stahel eds, *The Ecstasy of Things: From the Functional Object to the Fetish in Twentieth Century Photographs*, Göttingen, 2004, 88-95, and discussion in Sarah E. James, *Common Ground: German Photographic Cultures Across the Iron Curtain*, New Haven, CT, 2013, 167-178.

<sup>19</sup> Price, artist's text available online at <http://www.lux.org.uk/collection/works/user-group-disco> (accessed April 22, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> 'Mad Love', 5.

<sup>21</sup> 'The nose was thus the fetish, which, incidentally, he endowed at will with the luminous shine which was not perceptible to others'. Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 21, London, 2001, 147-157; 152.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), trans. Reginald Snell, Mineola, NY, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London, 1999, 81; Benjamin, quoted in David Batchelor, *The Luminous and the Grey*, London, 2014, 43.

<sup>24</sup> 'However deep the compulsion may lie that art divest itself of every trace of being a show, of its ancient deceitfulness in society, art no longer exists when that element has been totally eradicated. ... No sublimation succeeds that does not guard in itself what it sublimates.' Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> In this sense, shine enhances what Steven Connor discusses as the 'affordances' of objects, their capacity to 'hold out certain very specific kinds of physical invitation to us, often involving an angle of approach or physical address'. See Connor, *Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things*, London, 2011, 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> On *prosopopeia* as a technique commonly used in advertising, see Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 18-20.

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<sup>27</sup> Bender has said she was unaware of Birnbaum's practice, when she began working in around 1982. See Peter Doroshenko, 'Interview', in *Gretchen Bender: Work 1981-1991*, New York, 1991, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Bender emphasised the importance she placed on using 'several TVs going at once' in order to fracture the 'fiction' of television's 'single plane', and foster a 'more critical consciousness'. *Gretchen Bender: Work 1981-1991*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Thomas, 'Reviews: Gretchen Bender', *Art in America*, November 6, 2012, <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/gretchen-bender/> (accessed April 25, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> In her early works, Bender silk-screened words and phrases directly onto TV screens, so that the broadcast images 'continually interacted' with the text. See *Gretchen Bender: Work, 1981-1991*, 3, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Mike Pinnington, 'Who was Gretchen Bender?', Tate website, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/gretchen-bender-19998/who-was-gretchen-bender> (accessed April 25, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Dara Birnbaum, quoted in *Dara Birnbaum: The Dark Matter of Media Light* eds Karen Kelly, Barbara Schröder and Giel Vandecaveye, Stedelijk, 2009, 192. On the fetishistic mode of viewing that I suggest is at stake here, compare Laura Mulvey's discussion of 'the possessive spectator', glued to re-edited and slowed-down fragments of narrative film, in her *Death 24 x a Second*, London, 2006, 172-73; and on the estranging qualities of being brought closer to the fragmented, on-screen body, see Roland Barthes's earlier discussion, 'The Face of Garbo', in *Mythologies* (1957), London, 2000, 56-57.

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, although an early champion of Birnbaum's work, is one critic to voice this concern, warning that Birnbaum's work 'could integrate itself so successfully into the advanced technology and the linguistic perfection of governing television ideology that its original impulse of critical deconstruction could disappear.' Buchloh, 'Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art', *Artforum*, XXI, 1, September 1982, 50. Similarly, on being invited to make a piece for MTV, Birnbaum recalls 'a stern warning coming from Benjamin Buchloh: "What are you going to do for MTV, entering into that supermarket of images?"' 'Conversation: Hans Ulrich Obrist and Dara Birnbaum, September 1995', in *Dara Birnbaum: The Dark Matter of Media Light*, 22.

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<sup>34</sup> T.J. Demos, *Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, London, 2010, 49.

<sup>35</sup> See Maud Lavin, *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, New Haven, 1993, and Lavin, 'Strategies of Pleasure and Deconstruction: Hannah Höch's Photomontages in the Weimar Years', in Irit Rogoff ed., *The Divided Heritage: Themes and Problems in German Modernism*, Cambridge, 1991, 93-115.

<sup>36</sup> On postmodernism as the historical situation of the loss of the possibility of critical distance, see Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984), in Jameson *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC, 1991, 1-54. For Hal Foster's recent defence of 'critique', see his *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, New York, 2015, 115-124.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (1968), trans. James Benedict, New York, Verso, 1996, 114-115.

<sup>38</sup> For a detailed analysis of *Ballet Mécanique*, see Malcolm Turvey, *The Filming of Modern Life: European Avant-Garde Film of the 1920s*, Cambridge, MA, 2011, 51-56.

<sup>39</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951), trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, London, 1974, 225.

<sup>40</sup> Adorno, 'The Form of the Phonograph Record' (1934), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October*, 55, Winter 1990, 56-61.

<sup>41</sup> Price interviewed by Alessandro Vincentelli, in *Elizabeth Price: HERE*, exhibition leaflet published by the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 2012, unpaginated.

<sup>42</sup> Adorno, 'Form of the Phonograph Record', 56.

<sup>43</sup> Adorno, 'Form of the Phonograph Record', 57.

<sup>44</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1* (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes, London, 1990, 163-164.

<sup>45</sup> 'Mad Love', 4. Poe's description of the whirlpool is quoted by Adorno in the epigraph to his *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1933) trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis, 1989.

<sup>46</sup> '*Clinamen* ... I take the word from Lucretius, where it means a "swerve" of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe. ... A poet swerves away



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from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it.' Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford, 1973, 14. *Clinamen*, as a theory situated at the crux between 'world' and 'soul', or objectivity and subjectivity, is examined also by Michel Serres, in *The Birth of Physics* (1977), ed. David Webb, trans. Jack Hawkes, Manchester, 2000, 3-7 and *passim*.

<sup>47</sup> Anselm Franke, 'Beyond the Return of the Repressed', in Franke and Sabine Folie eds, *Animism: Modernity Through the Looking Glass*, Cologne, 2012, 172.

<sup>48</sup> Isabelle Stengers, 'Reclaiming Animism', in Franke and Folie eds, *Animism*, 188.

<sup>49</sup> Ngai's brilliant discussion of the 'animated' presents it as a performance of what is always on the back foot in any power play – the racial or sexual other, for example, or the working class. See Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, MA, 2005, 94: 'Whether marked as Irish, Jewish, Italian, Mexican or (most prominently in American literature and visual culture) African-American, the kind of exaggerated emotional expressiveness I call animatedness seems to function as a marker of racial or ethnic otherness in general', she writes.

<sup>50</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Disney* (1940), ed. Oksana Bulgakowa and Dietmar Hochmuth, trans. Dustin Condren, Berlin, 2011, 15. See also Esther Leslie's invaluable discussion in *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, New York, 2002, 219-250.

<sup>51</sup> T.J. Clark, 'Modernism, Postmodernism and Steam', *October*, 100, Spring 2002, 161; Hal Foster, 'Dada Mime', *October*, 105, Summer, 2003, 175, n. 17. This was a strategy proposed longer ago by Herbert Marcuse ('Art fights reification by making the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance'), in *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (1977), trans. Marcuse and Erica Sherover, London, 1979, 73.

<sup>52</sup> Christian Thorne, 'The Revolutionary Energy of the Outmoded', *October*, 104, Spring, 2003, 109; 112.

<sup>53</sup> For discussion of slapstick as 'the paradigmatic instance of cinema's ontology' see Tom Pauls and Rob King, *Slapstick Comedy*, London, 2010, 9 and *passim*; and for a discussion of the filmic specificity of slapstick, see Iain Crane, 'How the Slapstick Came to be Applied to Marjorie Beebe's Bottom', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 46, 3, June 2013, 507.

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<sup>54</sup> “One has to hand this to the Americans: with slapstick films, they have created a form that offers a counterweight to their reality. If in that reality they subject the world to an often unbearable discipline, the film in turn dismantles this self-imposed order quite forcefully.” Kracauer, quoted in Miriam Hansen, ‘The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 6, 2, April 1999, 70.

<sup>55</sup> Sam Thorne suggests the comparison with Busby Berkeley in ‘Follow Me’, *Frieze*, 134, October 2010, unpaginated.

<sup>56</sup> Price interviewed by Vincentelli, in *Elizabeth Price: HERE*, unpaginated.

<sup>57</sup> Compare, for example, Jameson’s account of the ‘depthlessness’ and ‘euphoria’ of postmodernism in the 1980s and ‘90s, in ‘Postmodernism’, 32-38.

<sup>58</sup> Emily Apter, ‘Planetary Dysphoria’, *Third Text*, 27:1, 2013, 131-140.

<sup>59</sup> Boscagli, *Stuff Theory*, 244.

<sup>60</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘The Notion of Expenditure’ (1933), in Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl, Minneapolis, MN, 1985, 118.

<sup>61</sup> Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 57.

<sup>63</sup> Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 131-132.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Truer than true’ and ‘more commodity than commodity’ in Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (1983), ed. Jim Fleming, trans. Philip Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski, New York, 1990, 7-9, 116-118; ‘outpacing’ in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (1990), trans. James Benedict, New York, 1993, 108.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin Noys *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, Edinburgh, 2010; Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, Winchester, 2010. See also Melissa Gronlund’s discussion of accelerationism in her recent book, *Contemporary Art and Digital Culture*, New York, 2017, 171-74.

<sup>66</sup> See Baudrillard’s discussion of a ‘logic of catastrophe’ and ‘Witz of events’ in *Transparency of Evil*, 103-104, 39-40; and related discussions in *Fatal Strategies* 13; 92-93, where he describes ‘something like a humorous providence that sees to the derailing of all this too smoothly running machine’.

<sup>67</sup> Apter, ‘Planetary Dysphoria’.

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<sup>68</sup> This punning allusion to bookbinding references a third form Price interweaves with the swaying bodies of the girl-group and the architecture of the church: the form of the book, via a folder of photographs of church architecture. For reasons of space, I am focusing here on the other elements in the work.

<sup>69</sup> Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, 110, Fall 2004, 3-22. Foster has returned to this discussion in *Bad New Days*, 31-60.

<sup>70</sup> Carl Einstein, 'Neolithic Childhood' (1930) trans. Kevin Kennedy, in *Neolithic Childhood: Art in a False Present, c.1930* ed. Anselm Franke and Tom Holert, Berlin, 2018, 74-5. 'According to Einstein, the untimely return of animist and mythic forces in industrial society imposed on art the old remedies invented by the painters of Altamira: namely, exorcism, practised by pictorial mimesis', Maria Stavrinaki glosses his argument, in 'Why did the 1930s identify with prehistory?', *Neolithic Childhood*, 86.

<sup>71</sup> A fire also ends *User Group Disco*, although one that is only described, in prose quoted from a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Circular Ruins' (1940).

<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, Gretchen Bender referred to her own artistic strategy as one of 'acceleration': 'I ... believe that an acceleration into, rather than a resistance to, our multi-layered visual environment will reveal structures or open windows to the development of a critical consciousness we can't yet perceive as useful from our immediate vantage point.' *Gretchen Bender: Work, 1981-1991*, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Price produced this video during her artist residency at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, supported by the Leverhulme Trust. The photographs are taken from glass-plate slides housed at the Laboratory, made between 1875 and 1945, using 'K' light, a light of high temperature, which reveals volatile activity such as sun-spots on the sun's surface. *SUNLIGHT* is the first part of a trilogy, of which the second part, *K*, was screened in Basel in 2015. Information from exhibition leaflet provided by the Focal Point Gallery, Southend-On-Sea, 2013, unpaginated.

<sup>74</sup> Artist file, 'Elizabeth Price: *K*', produced by MOT International, 2015, unpaginated.

<sup>75</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'A Thing Like You and Me' (2010), in Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin, 2012, 46-59; Linda Stupart, 'Rematerialising Feminism: Things Like Us and Them' (2014), <http://journalment.org/article/rematerialising->

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[feminism-things-us-and-them](#) (accessed January 5, 2017); Maria Walsh, 'I Object' (2013), *Art Monthly*, 371, November 2013, <http://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/i-object-by-maria-walsh-november-2013> (accessed January 5, 2017).

<sup>76</sup> Steyerl, 'A Thing Like You and Me', 50.

<sup>77</sup> See for example Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA, 1999, J85,2, 375, m4,7, 805. For discussion, see 'Empathy/Einfühlung', in Peter Buse et al, *Benjamin's Arcades: An Unguided Tour*, Manchester, 2005.

<sup>78</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, O11a,4, 511. See also discussion in Esther Leslie, 'Ruin and Rubble in the Arcades', and Susan Buck-Morss, 'The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore', in Beatrice Hanssen ed., *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, New York, 2006.

<sup>79</sup> See H.F. Mallgrave and E. Ikonomou eds, *Empathy, Form and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893*, Santa Monica, CA, 1994.

<sup>80</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (1908), trans. Michael Bullock, London, 1953, 23.

<sup>81</sup> Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' (1935), trans. John Shepley, *October*, 31, Winter 1984, 16-32. For Mauss's influence on Baudrillard, see Chris Turner, 'Introduction', in Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil, or, The Lucidity Pact*, trans. Chris Turner, Oxford, 2005, 2.